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Ideas and the Politics of School Choice Policy: Portfolio Management in Philadelphia

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Abstract

In this article, we examine the role of ideas in the politics of school choice policy. We situate our study within scholarship that understands frames and logics as types of ideas that operate in the foreground and background of policy debates. We focus on portfolio management, a model of reform in which a central office oversees a network of schools functioning under varying forms of governance. Our data are drawn from a case study of political contention over portfolio management reform in Philadelphia. We find that the frames and counterframes deployed by stakeholders are resonant with societal-level logics of community localism, market transaction, and state bureaucratic administration. Much scholarship on education reform efforts focuses on their effectiveness and sustainability; our study addresses sociological processes involved and demonstrates how ideational processes shape political contention in education reform. We challenge the notion that opponents of portfolio reform are merely defenders of the status quo, and demonstrate the ways in which portfolio opponents critique and seek to change existing conditions.

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Abstract

We examine the role of ideas in the politics of school choice policy and situate our study within scholarship that understands frames and logics as types of ideas operating in the foreground and background of policy debates. Our data are from a case study of political contention over portfolio management reform (in which a central office oversees a network of schools operating under varying forms of governance) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. We find that frames and counterframes deployed by stakeholders are resonant with societal-level logics of community localism, market transaction, and state bureaucratic administration. For proponents of portfolio reform, diagnostic frames are drawn from logics of community and state, while prognostic frames are resonant with a market logic. For opponents, the association is flipped. Diagnostic counterframes challenge a market logic, and logics of community and state inform prognostic counterframes. Our study demonstrates how ideational processes shape political contention in education reform.

Ideas and the Politics of School Choice Policy: Portfolio Management in Philadelphia

In recent years, urban school districts throughout the country have implemented a portfolio management model of governance (Bulkley, Henig, & Levin, 2010). Under this method of reform, a central office manages a “portfolio” of schools, both district and charter, with a range of curricular and programmatic offerings. A key component of the reform is the establishment of autonomous schools of choice coupled with mechanisms that allow for the closing of schools that fail to meet accountability standards (Bulkley, 2010). Proponents argue that in this model every school is under pressure to perform (e.g., Hill, Campbell, & Gross, 2013). Schools that underperform are subject to turnaround or closure, much like investors managing financial portfolios reallocate assets to maximize return and minimize risk. Opponents argue that the ideals of public education are fundamentally incompatible with the ideals of the marketplace, which necessarily creates winners and losers (e.g., Ravitch, 2006). Furthermore, some argue that portfolio models may exacerbate inequality because low-income students, immigrant students, students of color, and students with academic or behavioral challenges face systemic obstacles that impede their ability to choose better schools (Bergman & McFarlin, 2018; Fong & Faude, 2018).

In this article, we examine the role of ideas in the politics of school choice policy, focusing on the portfolio management model of reform. We situate our study within scholarship that understands *frames* as ideas that operate in the foreground of policy debates and *logics* as ideas that operate in the background (Campbell, 2004; DiMaggio, 1997).¹ Political sociologists have examined the difficult process of community-wide reform in education, including the degree to which community stakeholders are able to come together in service of a mutual agenda

(Stone et al., 2001). This article sheds light on the processes underlying the negotiation and contestation of these agendas, demonstrating how logics and frames help community stakeholders win over and mobilize adherents.

Philadelphia provides a helpful vantage point for this study. The district — among the largest in the United States — has experimented with various forms of portfolio management since 2001 (Abrams, 2016; Simon et al., 2017). It remains a contentious method of reform in the local landscape because it cannot be disentangled from a host of interrelated challenges facing the city’s schools. For years, the district has been under resourced, which has resulted in substandard facilities, declining enrollment, school closures, and low student achievement. These longstanding issues have fostered a community of education advocates, organizers, activists, philanthropists, and other informed and engaged stakeholders with a range of positions on the portfolio model. We argue that stakeholders understand and shape the debate over portfolio management through diagnostic and prognostic frames and counterframes that draw from multiple logics of contemporary U.S. society.

We begin by assessing recent scholarship that establishes frames and logics as jointly constituted ideas operating in the foreground and background of policy debates. We then describe Philadelphia’s particular brand of portfolio management. Following a description of our methodology, we discuss the study’s core findings. For one set of stakeholders, the school district is framed as a dysfunctional bureaucracy unable to produce educational outcomes; the solution is framed in ways that align with portfolio models of reform. For another set of stakeholders, the problem the district finds itself in is due to privatization; the solution is to preserve the public school district bureaucracy and increase community control of schools. The frames and counterframes deployed by these stakeholders are resonant with societal level logics

of community localism, market transaction, and state bureaucratic administration.

Frames and Logics as Jointly Constituted Sets of Ideas

Frames are “schemata of interpretation” that allow us to construct meaning for and make sense of events and occurrences (Goffman, 1974, p. 21). They focus our attention, allowing certain conditions to fade to the background and other conditions to appear more salient, thus guiding our responses. The concept of frames has been adapted to understand the “metaphors, symbolic representations, and cognitive cues” that assign meaning in policy reform and institutional change contexts (Zald, 1998, p. 262). Early work in this area applied frame analysis to help explain why people choose to participate in social movement organizations (SMOs) (Snow et al., 1986). While the frames themselves are an important subject of this analysis, the process of *framing* is an essential aspect; Snow and Benford (2005) distinguish between the static noun “frame” and the dynamic verb “framing.” It is in the process of debating, discussing, and deploying frames that their importance becomes clear: the frames themselves are significant insofar as they manifest in material practice (Snow & Benford, 2005).

One way frames are enacted is through frame alignment, in which SMOs link their “interpretive orientations” to those of potential adherents in order to mobilize them and gain support (Snow et al., 1986, p.464; Snow & Benford, 1988). Frame alignment includes amplification and extension processes (Snow et al., 1986). *Amplification* involves foregrounding a particular frame in order to play up its salience, and includes both *value amplification*, a focus on broad values like democracy or competition, and *belief amplification*, a focus on beliefs about the nature of things or ideas (for instance, “education is a universal right”). *Frame extension* involves broadening the scope of a framework to include other existing frames. These frames

may not be of primary salience to the SMO, but because they are salient to its potential adherents an effort is made to incorporate them into the SMO’s framework.

The framing process is both strategically and ideologically driven (Westby, 2005). A community organization working toward the implementation of universal pre-kindergarten (UPK) might frame the issue in a number of ways, both reflective of its own ideological positions and calculated to draw in different sets of supporters. An organization that views UPK as a reform that affects outcomes for historically marginalized students might engage in frame amplification and emphasize the values of equity and justice. The organization may also strategically engage in frame extension in order to win the allegiance of working parents and, from among the additional available frames, emphasize one that focuses on UPK as an opportunity for free childcare.

Snow and Benford (1988) differentiate between diagnostic and prognostic frames. Whereas diagnostic frames address the nature and source of the problem, prognostic frames address possible solutions and strategies. What has the potential to be taken up as a viable prognostic frame is dependent on the diagnostic frames at play. For example, Coburn (2006) shows how the principal and teachers at a California school made sense of a statewide reading initiative through a process of framing and reframing the problem (*diagnostic*) and attendant solutions (*prognostic*). From the outset, faculty shared a concern — low test scores in reading comprehension — but they approached the issue differently. Some diagnosed the problem as the result of limited student vocabularies, while others blamed the instructional practices of teachers. Each of these diagnostic frames suggested a distinct set of solutions, and without agreement on the appropriate solution there was no way for the group to move forward. Over the course of the year, the principal and teachers negotiated a framing that ascribed the problem to a lack of

alignment among grade levels, allowing them to move forward with a strategy of aligning their instructional methods.

Woulfin, Donaldson, and Gonzales (2016) further illustrate the importance of the interplay between diagnostic and prognostic framing. In their study of the implementation of a new statewide teacher evaluation initiative in Connecticut, they demonstrate how district leaders are responsible for framing new policies in ways that will lead principals and teachers to implement them. They found that district leaders overemphasized prognostic framing, sending numerous messages about how the policy should be enacted, without adequately focusing their diagnostic framing. As a result, educators were left without a clear understanding of what the new policy was for or how it could help them, which ultimately contributed to “compliance rather than full engagement with the spirit and substance of the reform” (p. 133).

While Coburn and Woulfin and colleagues are concerned with how policy is implemented, frame analysis can also be used to understand how policy is formed. Grossman (2010) shows how a group of “insider activists” — teachers and administrators — successfully used framing to persuade state lawmakers to extend a waiver exempting a group of schools from New York’s high school exit exam. The activists represented schools that had been covered by a waiver under a previous administration because they had developed an alternative, performance-based assessment of student success. In their fight to extend the waiver, they strategically employed an equity frame, arguing that the statewide exam harmed Black and Latinx student outcomes and positioning their own assessment practices as a solution to this problem. By employing a diagnostic frame that resonated with policy makers, the activists made room for the legislators to embrace their prognostic frame.

Frames can be thought of as ideas operating in the foreground of policy debates: theories

and concepts that are articulated and deployed by stakeholders. Logics, on the other hand, operate in the background of policy debates (Campbell, 2004). Logics are sets of “material practices and symbolic constructions” that constitute patterns of organization and provide meaning and guidance for appropriate behavior (Friedland & Alford, 1991, p. 248; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). Society is comprised of institutional orders — the state, family, community, market, professions, and religions, for example — each with a fundamental logic (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Thornton, 2004). Like frames, logics become meaningful as they are enacted in observable practices and structures. The institutional order of the market, for instance, is built around symbolic constructions — beliefs, ideas, assumptions, and values — that are expressed and made concrete in the material practices of buying and selling commodities, the rules that govern transactions, and the structures of the marketplace (Friedland & Alford, 1991). While the symbolic and the material are distinct components of logics, they are “intertwined and constitutive of one another” (Thornton et al., 2012, p. 10). We can understand material practices only in relation to their corresponding symbolic constructions, which in turn are understandable in relation to material practices (Friedland & Alford, 1991).

Organizational fields are often governed by multiple overlapping, contradictory, or competing logics. For example, Glazer, Massell, and Malone (2019) examine Tennessee’s Achievement School District, a turnaround district for the state’s lowest performing schools that relies heavily on charter takeovers. Charter operators worked within an environment that drew from the logics of the market — which emphasized choice, competition, and autonomy — and the state — which privileged bureaucratic control. In addition, a third logic was significant: a community logic derived from the rich legacy of organizing and participation among African Americans in Memphis (where most of the turnaround schools were located) to which charter

operators were compelled to adapt.

While frames are regularly debated and discussed, logics tend to be less directly engaged (Campbell, 2004). However, in order to be effective, frames must be derived from prevailing logics (Snow & Benford, 2005). In this way, frames and logics are “jointly constituted” (Westby, 2005, p. 220). For instance, Russell (2011) examines the redefinition of kindergarten education. Kindergarten was once framed as a means of transitioning children from home to school, a period of time designed for play and experiential learning. The public and professional discourse on, and the structure of, kindergarten aligned with what Russell describes as a developmental logic. Over time, kindergarten changed, and an academic logic became dominant. Instead of a “children’s garden,” kindergarten was now framed in ways that suggested a focus on standards, formal instruction, and traditional academic subjects.

Collectively, this scholarship provides a framework for understanding the role of ideas in the politics of school reform. A set of stakeholders — advocates, organizers, community leaders, and policy makers — strategically deploy, amplify, and extend frames that align with the interests of their constituents, validate organizational activities and priorities, articulate problems, and influence decision makers and the general public to consider their preferred solutions. Other sets of stakeholders with alternate ideas about the extant problems and their solutions similarly deploy counterframes. These diagnostic and prognostic frames and counterframes are both guided and constrained by logics governing the field. In this article, we assess how political contention over portfolio management reform was understood and shaped by local education stakeholders through frames and counterframes that articulated ideas about problems and their solutions in the local education landscape. The frames and counterframes were resonant with broader, societal-level logics of contemporary America: community localism,

market transaction, and state bureaucratic administration (Thornton et al., 2012).

Portfolio Management in Philadelphia

Portfolio management — a key part of the “new school reform ecology” — refers to models of reform in which a central office oversees a network of schools functioning under varying forms of governance (Bulkley & Henig, 2015, p. 55). Portfolio reform is typically found in large urban districts where achievement gaps across race and class lines are common — New Orleans, Atlanta, Philadelphia, and elsewhere — and is often introduced with much conflict (Bulkley & Henig, 2015; Hill et al., 2009; Hill et al., 2013). Theoretically, schools that are part of a portfolio work to continuously improve in response to the system of choice and high stakes accountability inherent in the reform. If schools are unable to enroll enough students or meet performance standards, they are in danger of being closed. As portfolios grow, the role of the central office is meant to change, focusing on closing and opening schools based on performance rather than directly managing schools. Portfolio management is part of a succession of recent reforms that shift power from local districts, raising questions about the democratic control of schooling (Bulkley & Henig, 2015; Cohen et al., 2016).

The School District of Philadelphia (SDP) was an early adopter of the diverse provider model, a precursor to portfolio management (Simon et al., 2017). In 2001, with the district facing financial difficulties and persistent under-achievement, Pennsylvania assumed direct control of the district from the local board of education. Between 2002 and 2018, SDP was overseen by the School Reform Commission (SRC), a governing body in which three of five commissioners, including the chairperson, were appointed by the governor.² Following the state takeover, the governor proposed turning over management of the district to Edison Schools, Inc., at the time

the nation's largest for-profit education management organization. The plan was met with swift and emphatic opposition from many city officials, educators, students, and community members (Abrams, 2016). Ultimately, this plan was dropped and the SRC outsourced the management of 46 low-performing schools to seven private sector providers, including Edison (Gill et al., 2007). The new providers were accountable to the same district requirements as other schools but were independently responsible for the design and delivery of instructional methods and professional development (Bulkley, Mundell, & Riffer, 2004).

Philadelphia faces resource constraints that limit its ability to provide equitable and adequate levels of education to its students, and the district struggles with producing positive academic outcomes. In 2010, SDP began a turnaround initiative that resulted in the conversion of several district schools into charters. In 2011, the district laid off over 3,000 employees and Boston Consulting Group (BCG) was brought in, with underwriting from a local foundation, to develop a plan to pull the district out of its financial situation. BCG proposed a transformation strategy to help the district adopt a portfolio model that included closing dozens of district schools and expanding charter schools (BCG, 2012). At the same time, local advocates backed by private philanthropy developed a portfolio plan designed to bring together district, charter, and parochial schools (Simon et al., 2017).

SDP doubled down on the portfolio management approach with a 2012 plan that would drastically downsize the central office, shift accountability to smaller networks and school leaders, close over 60 schools, and increase charter school enrollment (Graham, 2012). While this plan was not adopted in its original form, the next two years saw the closure of 30 schools and over 3,700 additional layoffs (in both rounds of layoffs, many employees were eventually rehired). Decisions to close or turn around district schools were made amid a maelstrom of

opposing advocacy and activism throughout the city that included protests, civil disobedience, lobbying, media campaigns, and the filing of a civil rights complaint with the U.S. Department of Education (Hurdle, 2013). The SRC had its supporters, though, with many stakeholders agreeing that the way forward was at least in part through a sweeping facilities reorganization. This is the context in which our study — focused on the immediate aftermath of the school closures and BCG proposal — takes place.

Data & Methods

We used an inductive case study method to facilitate theoretical elaboration of the role of ideas in the politics of school choice policy. Data were analyzed from informant interviews, observations, and document review. Between February 2013 and March 2014, a team of research assistants led by the first author conducted 68 hour-long interviews with stakeholders, all prominent, knowledgeable, and influential actors inside and outside the local school bureaucracy. Interview participants included 26 parent, student, and neighborhood leaders, activists, and advocates; 23 teacher activists and union organizers; and 19 high-level bureaucrats, elected officials, policy advocates, and funders (see Table 1). The core interview questions asked informants to map out the political landscape of education mobilization and reform in Philadelphia by reflecting on (a) local reform policy alternatives, (b) the “various sides of the debate,” and (c) the motivations and incentives of stakeholders. With consent from participants, interviews were recorded and transcribed.

<Table 1 >

Between January 2013 and August 2014, the research team observed school district town hall meetings, public protests, and other events in order to understand the content and trajectory

of political mobilization and reform. The research team also reviewed documents including meeting minutes, newsletters, press releases, and memos from the school district and community organizations working on local education issues, primarily to develop a contextual understanding of the local education landscape.

Data Analysis

Analysis began by reading through data pertaining to discrete periods of time in order to develop a synthesized, fine-grained understanding of the sequence of events. Analytic memos describing “off the cuff” impressions were produced as a means of creating and refining the initial set of codes and identifying preliminary areas of interest. Several rounds of coding interviews and observations began in 2014, with early rounds involving open coding of instances of political framing. A final set of analytical rounds of coding was conducted in 2019 by the second author to help confirm and extend the arguments developed from earlier analytical rounds.

Ideas and the Politics of Portfolio Management Reform

We now turn to a discussion of our findings: the framing and counterframing of portfolio management by local education stakeholders, and the frames’ joint constitution with logics of community localism, market transaction, and state bureaucratic administration. We first examine the diagnostic and prognostic frames deployed by proponents of portfolio reform. These stakeholders frame the district’s problems as the result of a dysfunctional bureaucracy and argue for a dramatic shift away from the status quo, in the form of choice and competition brought about by portfolio management. We then examine the counterframes used by stakeholders opposed to portfolio management. This group objects to the marketization of the field and

advocates for a renewed commitment to community influence and public accountability. For proponents of portfolio management, the diagnostic frames are drawn from logics of community localism and state bureaucratic administration; the prognostic frames are drawn from a logic of market transaction. For opponents, the converse is true: the diagnostic counterframes are drawn from a logic of market transaction and the prognostic counterframes are drawn from logics of community localism and state bureaucratic administration.

Supporting Portfolio Management

Diagnosing the problems. For many of those advocating for the continued development of portfolio management in Philadelphia, the problem lies with the dysfunction of the existing bureaucracy. The district has suffered years of fiscal mismanagement. According to Kathy Dean, a charter school founder and advocate, “[T]here has not been the proper management fiscally over the last ten years.” (All names are pseudonyms.) Will Frank, an elected official, complains about the lack of financial transparency in the district, saying that the local government has little oversight and access to information. Others acknowledge the role of the financial plight of the district, but caution that more money or better fiscal management would not be a panacea. These people point out that even in a sound financial situation, the district would still have many problems. “Why put more air into a tire that’s got a huge hole in it? It doesn’t fix the problem,” says Frank. David Allen, who works for a statewide organization whose mission is in line with portfolio management, argues that, in addition to money, the district needs “transformational change”—a diagnosis that is elaborated on below. For him, the budget “often becomes an excuse” for not taking action in this direction.

For these stakeholders, fighting for anything other than “transformational change” is

advocating for the status quo. Allen faults the local advocacy community for “complacency” and for pushing for “defensive measures” as opposed to presenting an “offensive agenda” that would lead to “transformation.” Of those who are fighting the closures of neighborhood schools, Frank says, “[T]hey are fighting to keep open these horrible schools where the dropout rate is astronomical. [...] Everybody likes to keep everything the same.”

For these stakeholders and others aligned with them, the deeper problem in the district is one of poor bureaucratic administration. For some, the chaos of the sudden school closures could have been avoided by more consistent, adaptive leadership. Kathy Dean and David Allen both note that charter schools have been expanding in the district for years, and that the resulting empty district seats are a problem that should have been anticipated. “That didn’t happen overnight,” Allen remarks, “it’s a decade of charter growth and of absolute failure to adapt.” Similarly, Al Taylor, another charter school leader, holds that the schools that were closed due to poor maintenance could have been saved with more foresight. Fred Harris and Betty Garcia are both affiliated with an organization that is closely involved with the district’s move toward portfolio management, Harris as a staff member and Garcia as a board member who is also part of the local philanthropic community. Harris explains that the problem is the high rate of turnover in the district: “If you have leadership that’s constantly turning over and constantly walking away and constantly disinvesting, you have a continual rebuilding of a system that could have been established.” Garcia is satisfied with the current leadership in the district; she pins the problem on the governor and the city council, both of whom she paints as failing to take responsibility for the district. For these stakeholders, the problems faced by SDP are framed primarily as stemming from the district itself.

Proposing a solution. The solution to these problems is a new outlook that privileges

(perceived) quality over school form, and which embraces features of the free market: choice, competition, and private management through charter schools and intradistrict choice. Betty Garcia argues for a “new dichotomy” in thinking about schools:

When people are in favor of public schools, [...] it’s a false predilection, because is anybody really in favor of schools that can never make adequate yearly progress? [...] So, I think that that divide, charter versus public, is a false one. [...] What I mean by that is I think that people ought to be figuring out ways to put money in the hands of people, regardless of the basis of their school’s functioning, the people who are proving that they can do a good job. And that is many district schools and many charter schools.

The organization Garcia is affiliated with funds schools based on their ability to do “an excellent job for poor children.” Similarly, her colleague Fred Harris frames the organization’s mission as “to literally create as many high-performing seats throughout the city as possible.” Bonnie Zimmerman, a senior staff person for the city, and Frances Valentine, an elected official, agree. Zimmerman emphasizes students “getting the best education they can” over whether they attend charter or district-managed schools, or even parochial or private schools. She sees “all the schools in Philadelphia, even the private schools, as part of our overall goal of having a more educated citizenry.” Valentine sees charter schools as an important and desirable aspect of the field, and also acknowledges the need to continue supporting public education. For these stakeholders, the type of school matters less than their perceived quality.

Creating “high-performing” seats happens through competition and choice. For Kathy Dean, the charter school leader, bringing competition into education is common sense. She compares education to private enterprise, drawing on the example of big box stores competing to offer the best deal and asking, “And isn’t America about competition? It is, except for education:

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3 *You just go where I tell you.*” She believes “that everybody has the right to pick their school,” a
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5 right that she says is currently only available to families who can afford tuition for private
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7 schools. She paints competition as a fundamentally American value, and choice as a fundamental
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9 right. Like Dean, Fred Harris links competition and choice:
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12 If you inform parents of what their options are [...] they’ll choose the best-performing
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14 option for their student, is my sole belief. And by allowing them to cluster students into
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16 the best-performing schools, you eliminate the lower-performing schools and you bring
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18 attention to highlight the fact that you have parents opting into something better.
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21 Allowing parents to choose schools will force schools to compete for enrollment, these
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23 stakeholders argue, and the best schools will naturally rise to the top, allowing the lowest
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25 performers to be “eliminated.” Others take a more proactive approach to this process, like Betty
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27 Garcia, who says that her organization *seeks out* the best schools and invests in them.
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31 Charter schools are a critical part of portfolio reform’s emphasis on competition and
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33 choice. Al Taylor and Kathy Dean, both founders of charter schools, see the charter model as
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35 having potential to improve on the current educational options available to parents. Dean sees
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37 charters as a reform model intended to provide alternative options for people dissatisfied with
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39 their public schools, and Taylor explains that “charter schools were set up specifically to
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41 challenge public schools. [...] They make them better.” Through alternative school models,
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43 selective funding, and letting parents’ choices dictate which schools rise to the top and which are
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45 eliminated, these stakeholders advocate for a new model of education.
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49 The people who support the continued development of portfolio management offer a
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51 market-based reform in response to what they see as the inefficacy of the status quo. They argue
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53 that public management of education has failed, as evidenced by the current situation of
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underfunding, underperformance, and under-enrollment. The traditional methods of state and local control have led to inconsistencies among schools and inequities in students’ ability to access a high-quality education. These failures signal the need for a dramatic shift in how the field is conceived and controlled. This set of stakeholders looks to the market for inspiration. Embracing attributes of the free market like choice and competition, they position parents and students as consumers. When parents are free to choose schools for their children, they argue, schools will naturally need to compete with one another to maintain enrollments, much as companies compete with one another to garner customers. Parents will choose the best schools, allowing them to prevail, and schools that do not perform well enough to attract students are forced to close.

Opposing Portfolio Management

Diagnosing the problems. On the other side of the issue are those stakeholders who advocate for fully preserving the public nature of education. Many of the people who fall into this group are community activists and organizers. Philadelphia has a thriving organizing community, including several youth and teacher activist groups. Some social service agencies and organizations that cater to specific neighborhoods or populations also employ organizers and advocates. In addition, local groups and coalitions have sprung up specifically to address the problems facing the school district.

One longtime community activist, Diana Jones, worries that the emerging model of education in Philadelphia entails an abdication of a “basic responsibility for providing public education for students.” This shift toward private control is seen by many as part of a larger agenda, what youth organizer Thomas Sanders describes as “a national agenda of privatization

that is being carried out across the country, in major cities across the country, major school districts across the country.” Lawrence Bonifacio, a labor activist, describes a coordinated effort on the part of philanthropies, corporations, and reformers, which he sees as “all part of a long-term plan.”

According to these stakeholders, private entities enter the field for several reasons. In some cases, the motivation may simply be “privatization, just the belief that the market can do it better,” states Anthony Young, whose organization mobilizes public school parents. Several interviewees believe that private actors see involvement in the education field as an opportunity to get their hands on public money. Young continues, “I think there’s private moneyed interests that think of this multi-billion-dollar [...] industry that’s public right now [...] as the next frontier for private money, money-making.” Young’s colleague Mark Roy and teacher activist Susan Nguyen both echo this, calling the situation in Philadelphia “an effort to privatize public education so that people can profiteer off of it more effectively” (Roy) and positioning school choice as “a vehicle for [...] shifting our public tax dollars into private hands and private management” (Nguyen).

Olivia Lee, an advocate with another parent organizing group, cautions that the source of funding also dictates “who’s driving the agenda financially within education and whose interests are actually being served.” In Philadelphia, she says:

A small group of private donors can try to influence or have a tremendous impact on public policy and public decision-making. [...] And now, we’re sort of at the mercy, without a whole lot of scrutiny or oversight, of people who have almost no engagement or training or involvement in public schools beyond a desire to use their money to dramatically alter and change them outside of the traditional public process.

Rachel Marks, an advocate for public schools in her neighborhood, also sees the presence of private donors in the field as connected to the concern for maintaining public control: the money they bring to the table allows the expansion of private influence “to happen at a much more rapid pace, with a whole lot less public input or disclosure than there would be otherwise.” The ability to use money to shift agendas constitutes “an incredible amount of power” according to Gary Unger, a policy advocate. Labor activist Evan Park points out that the presence of pro-privatization actors on foundation boards impacts the community groups they fund: “there’s constantly a concern and worry that their actions or holding the district or city accountable will hurt their own funding.” This is, again, a threat to public control of the process.

Efforts by private entities to enter the education field take many forms. Mark Roy describes a cycle of privatization and opposition, beginning with the introduction of private for-profit education management organizations in 2002. Eventually, he says,

I think that the people who are interested in privatizing recognized: [...] we can’t just come in and say we’re going to run your school district for profit, because people get so up in arms about it. We have to find much more subtle ways of doing that. And they tried vouchers for a long time, and, again, people were too opposed to vouchers for that to pass.

Charter schools represent a trend toward privatization. Some, like Gary Unger, see charters as harming the public system by causing under-enrollment and ultimately closures of neighborhood schools. In addition, many stakeholders maintain that charter schools do not serve the public equitably. Unger notes that charter schools are “particularly difficult for our vulnerable student populations [like transient youth and youth in poverty] to access.” Anthony Young paints charter advocates as “fighting to make schools work for some number of children, but [...] it’s not a recipe for success across the board.” Others, like Diana Jones, see the promise of community-run

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3 charter schools and advocate against charters that lack accountability to the community. These
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5 stakeholders share a mistrust of the presence of private forces in the domain of public education.
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8 There is also a shared understanding that the district is facing administrative challenges.
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10 Like those who advocate for portfolio management, stakeholders on this side of the issue place
11
12 some blame with SDP, the SRC, and the state government. Nora West, a teacher activist, sums
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14 up a sentiment expressed by several interviewees when she says that she and her colleagues find
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16 it “troubling [...] that the school district tends to not have a long-term plan for anything.” But
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18 where portfolio management advocates see the solution as shifting resources to private
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20 management, these stakeholders advocate for maintaining public management of schools.
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24 *Proposing a solution.* The stakeholders opposed to privatization share a conviction that
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26 public education is worth preserving as a public good. As one community activist explained,
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28 “We’re generally anti-privatization. We really feel like things that should be public should be run
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30 and managed by the public, it should be transparent” (Cecilia Cohen). Hillary Kruger, a policy
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32 advocate, further elaborated on her own organization’s stance: in a public education system
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34 “there are benefits accrued to more than just the individuals involved; that society has something
35
36 to gain from having a strong public educational system. That public education is a right.”
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40 While charters are often situated as a threat to public education, many are also clear that
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42 charter and public schools can co-exist, so long as the public aspect is maintained. Mark Roy
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44 explains, “It’s fine to have public schools that exist outside the confines of the district [i.e.,
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46 charter schools], but it needs to be done in a way that complements the district, instead of
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48 competing with it.” Charter schools are approached with skepticism, however, because they are
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50 perceived not to serve the public equitably; ultimately, schools need to be open to everyone.
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53 Paula Vesey, an advocate for her local public school, holds that “schools should serve all
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children in the catchment area,” while Hillary Kruger believes “that it’s not fair that access and opportunity are not fairly distributed at the moment. And that fair distribution would go a long way towards improving outcomes.”

Neighborhood schools are also important because they serve as community centers. Stakeholders like Hillary Kruger advocate for community schools that unite health and social services in neighborhood school buildings. “Every child should be able to walk to their neighborhood school,” says Rachel Marks. A school is “an epicenter for a neighborhood and needs to be treated as such” (Paula Vesey). The end goal is not just community schools, but also community *control* of schools. Susan Nguyen, the teacher activist, explains that “it really has to be [...] about a reclaiming of kind of public good and space and community control. [...] The people most affected need to be part of making the decisions because they’ll make better ones.” This is true at all levels, from individual schools and communities to the district itself. At the district level, there is concern about the unelected School Reform Commission being “unaccountable to the community itself, and instead [being] accountable to the wishes of the governor and the mayor” (Thomas Sanders). Community control is also “about who are the people making the decisions in our schools” (Susan Nguyen), and needs to include not just parents but also “concerned community residents. They might be grandparents, they might just live in a neighborhood around schools and recognize the value of public education” (Anthony Young). These stakeholders’ solutions to the problems facing SDP share features of public accountability and community control.

The advocates pushing against the trend towards portfolio management eschew the market logic that accompanies it. They reject the idea that marketization brings greater choice for families and students. Instead, they say, a privately managed education system lacks public

accountability and a community-oriented approach. In this system, the entities with the most money have the most influence, but these stakeholders believe that public education should be publicly controlled, and that communities should shape their schools. For these stakeholders, this stance is not about accepting the current state of education. As Anthony Young states, “what’s really hard for those of us on the side of trying to defend public education [...] is we get kind of pigeon-holed into *we’re defending the status quo*.” Whereas portfolio management proponents position the public as consumers, opponents of portfolio reform push for the public to have oversight, decision-making power, and the ability to hold the system accountable.

Discussion

Ideas about the market, community, and state were evident in the ways stakeholders framed and counterframed the portfolio management model of reform. For one set of stakeholders, diagnostic frames were drawn from logics of community localism and state bureaucratic administration to reveal the district’s troubles, while their prognostic frames were resonant with a market transaction logic. For this group, the salient problem in the district was bureaucratic dysfunction and ineffective local control. The attendant solution was the continued development of portfolio management, choice, and competition. For another set of stakeholders, this relationship was flipped: the problem was the growing trend of marketization and privatization of education, and the solution was increased community and local control. For this second group, their diagnostic counterframes challenged a market transaction logic, and logics of community localism and state bureaucratic administration informed their prognostic counterframes.

Stakeholders deploy diagnostic and prognostic frames designed to resonate with their constituents and influence decision makers and the broader public (Snow et al., 1986). They

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2
3 strategically amplify values and beliefs to undergird their positions and draw in adherents. Kathy
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5 Dean and Fred Harris, for example, amplified the values of choice and competition, tying them
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7 to the push for portfolio management. On the other hand, Susan Nguyen and others amplified the
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9 value of community and democratic control as justification for maintaining the public nature of
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11 education. Where advocates of portfolio management amplified the beliefs that public education
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13 is failing and the market is efficient, opponents amplified the beliefs that education is a public
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15 good and that market principles do not belong in education. The two sides were also responding
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17 to one another. One group presents portfolio management as a problem, the other defends it and
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19 offers it as a solution. One side claims that the traditional school bureaucracy coupled with
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21 community control is the solution, and the other responds that the school bureaucracy is the
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23 problem.
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29 Of course, the delineation between these two groups and their frames was not always so
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31 stark. Stakeholders on both sides of portfolio reform recognized that the district's lack of funding
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33 played a significant role in creating the problems that SDP faced, and they used similar
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35 diagnostic and prognostic frames around the issue. The lack of a statewide fair funding formula
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37 was particularly salient. Anthony Young and Chris Weller, a community activist who opposes
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39 privatization and a funder whose organization supports portfolio management reform efforts,
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41 both explained how the lack of a formula based on student enrollment and school need led to
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43 gross underfunding in Philadelphia. While Thomas Sanders and Betty Garcia share different
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45 visions of how schools should be managed, they both agreed that a funding formula was an
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47 important policy solution.³
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52 In addition, several stakeholders who advocated for locally oriented reforms also
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54 acknowledged the dysfunction of the school district as a factor in the problems the district was
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3 facing. Likewise, some advocates of market reforms engaged in frame extension, expanding their
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5 repertoire of frames to include aspects of community localism in their prescriptions (Snow et al.,
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7 1986). In the first case, the diagnostic framing of bureaucratic dysfunction, while more closely
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9 aligned with a market logic, was not necessarily deployed to appeal to pro-marketization actors.
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11 In the second case, however, advocates of market-based reforms used frames encompassing
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13 some aspects of community localism to appeal to community members who might not otherwise
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15 be sympathetic to market ideals in education. Mark Roy, above, narrated the process by which
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17 those seeking privatization had to negotiate which reforms would be acceptable to the
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19 community (explicit focus on profit, vouchers, charter schools); by strategically extending their
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21 frames to include those resonant with the logic of community localism, those who advocate for
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23 marketization may draw in new adherents. In both cases, frames that spoke to a logic of market
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25 transaction were accommodating ideas centered on a logic of community localism.
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31 Opponents of portfolio management are often positioned on the defensive or portrayed as
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33 supporting the status quo, in contrast to the transformational innovations of market reformers.
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35 Our case challenges that perspective and demonstrates the ways in which portfolio opponents
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37 critique and seek to change the status quo. While many market reformers reject ideas that reflect
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39 aspects of the status quo, they often recognize the necessity of using the language of community
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41 localism. When portfolio advocates extend the market frame to accommodate this language, the
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43 focus is on individual family choice. However, community entails cooperative solutions to
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45 shared problems (Briggs, 2008). When advocates of privatization fail to address this distinction,
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47 their arguments may lose currency with the community members they seek to serve.
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54 Conclusion

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With this article, we contribute to political sociology scholarship in education by offering insight into the nature of advocacy and activism over portfolio reform, an increasingly popular choice-based method of reform in large urban districts throughout the country. Constellations of ideas — jointly constituted background logics and foreground frames — mobilized by stakeholders can pattern education reform efforts and constrain, guide, and legitimate the decisions of policymakers (Quinn, Oelberger, & Meyerson, 2016). This article examines efforts to construct consensus around a political agenda among local education stakeholders and seeks to illuminate the sociological processes underlying the negotiation and contestation of ideas and policy positions (Shipps, 2003; Stone et al., 2001). It also builds on literature that examines the attempts of local education stakeholders to delay or diminish the intentions of policymakers (e.g., Honig, 2006). Unlike much of the scholarship in this area, which focuses on the effectiveness and sustainability of reform efforts, our article addresses sociological processes involved, particularly ideational processes, and how they influence education reform.

Notes

1. John Campbell (2004) uses the term “paradigms” to describe “cognitive background assumptions that constrain decision making and institutional change” and acknowledges that this is much the same way organizational institutionalists have used the term “institutional logics” (p. 94). Because our study places its focus on a local organizational field, we opt for the term “logics.”
2. Oversight of the school district now occurs through a local board appointed by the mayor.
3. In June 2016, Pennsylvania enacted a law that established a fair funding formula and provided additional funding for financially distressed school districts (Act 35).

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Table 1. Interview Participants (partial list).

Pseudonym	Role
Al Taylor	School Leader
Anthony Young	Community Organizer
Betty Garcia	Philanthropy Executive
Bonnie Zimmerman	Elected Official
Cecilia Cohen	Labor Organizer
Chris Weller	Philanthropy Executive
David Allen	Policy Advocate
Diana Jones	Community Advocate
Eric Olsen	Nonprofit Executive
Evan Park	Teacher Activist
Frances Valentine	Elected Official
Fred Harris	Policy Advocate
Gary Unger	Policy Advocate
Hillary Kruger	Policy Advocate
Irene Evans	Policy Advocate
Jessica Barnard	Community Organizer
Kathy Dean	Charter School Executive
Lawrence Bonifacio	Labor Organizer
Mark Roy	Community Organizer
Nora West	Teacher Activist
Olivia Lee	Community Organizer
Paula Vesey	Parent Leader
Rachel Marks	Parent Leader
Susan Nguyen	Teacher Activist
Thomas Sanders	Community Organizer
Will Frank	Elected Official